

# LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS

by Danny Halls

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I've been living in Silicon Valley for two years, and I've been having some trouble figuring this place out. I thought maybe it was just me, but I've been glad to find out that there are a lot of other people who can't figure it out either.

There was an interesting set of articles in the *San Jose Mercury News* on August 16, 1999 about all the issues of Silicon Valley. One was a big story about real estate prices in the valley.<sup>1</sup> It highlighted four different families at various income levels and some of their struggles with this.

Another was a follow-up article that talked about how the introduction of great sums of money into the local economy has altered the concept of life here.<sup>2</sup> The article traced a little bit of the history of the area, recalling the time when there were only small towns scattered among the orchards all around here, and then recounting how it was transformed into this great corporate network built up around the high-technology industries. The article went on to say that even in the early days of the technological growth of this area, there was a sense that "we're all in this together" in solving these great technological issues, looking for the next frontier.

But now this steady introduction of great sums of money is altering even relationships among friends. In a given group of friends, men or women perhaps in their twenties and thirties, if one of them is working for a company that goes public, overnight wealth can come to them. Now they're no longer at the same financial stratum as their friends. "This will never change me," they say, but then they start thinking about buying a house in Palo Alto or Los Altos Hills or Menlo Park, or a little farther up the peninsula if they really did well. And all of a sudden there's a gap between them and their friends, and everything has changed. So the issue of money has undermined the sense of community that once was a part of life here.

Add to that the general intensity of life here--the competitiveness, the pace--and what we find is something we all feel, a decided lack of community or connectedness.

One of the interesting things about the message of God's word is that it meets us right where we are in so many issues of life. God has been taking me on a journey during the last year, rekindling in me some of the flames of my heart that I had allowed to grow cold, and giving me a real sense of his power and presence in my life. Over the last year I've spent a lot of time working through issues related to my own passion for him, what it means to worship him and draw near to him.

But it never stops there. Any real encounter with God changes the way we perceive all the other realities around us. If we're going to truly encounter the living God, that will have profound things to say about how we view each other.

So our goal in this message is to at least pose to ourselves the question: Is it possible to be men and women of faith, to truly encounter the living God with all that such an encounter means, in an environment like this valley? I hope I'll challenge you to think that through. We're going to look at Luke 10:25-37, where Jesus challenges a young lawyer to think differently about the nature of religious life and personal life, to radically alter his view of how the truth of God applies to him in the context in which he lives. I want to draw some principles from this story that I hope will cause us to question some of the ways that we ourselves approach life.

**And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,**

him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

This story is a two-part dialogue between this young lawyer and Jesus. There is beautiful symmetry in the way it's written, with four parts to each half of the dialogue.

Each half of the dialogue begins with the lawyer's questioning Jesus. We find out right away that in each case there are some unsavory motives going on behind his question. In the first half, we're told that he asks Jesus a question in order to test him. In the second half, we're told that he asks Jesus a question in order to justify himself. On both occasions Jesus responds to his question with a counter-question. And then in each case the lawyer answers Jesus' question correctly, interestingly enough, followed by a final word from Jesus: "You got it right," and, "Go do it."

Let's walk through this passage.

### **The summation of the Law**

It says that the lawyer stands up, and then he addresses Jesus as "Teacher." If anyone wanted to ask a question of a teacher in those times, they would stand up. It was a posture of respect. The lawyer's calling Jesus "Teacher," which is an appropriate title, is ironic because here he is, on the outside posturing as a very respectful inquirer, while in his heart he is trying to test Jesus. He wants to tempt him. He's trying, as were so many of Jesus' adversaries in the religious hierarchy of Palestine in that time, to find a way to get Jesus to slip up theologically or morally, in order to undermine his credibility among the growing masses.

The young lawyer asks Jesus, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now, that question has an internal contradiction: What shall I *do* to *inherit*? We don't do something to gain an inheritance. An inheritance is granted according to right of some sort. But within their system, they had begun to think like that.

Jesus responds with a counter-question: "What do you think the Law says in answer to your question?" The young lawyer responds with this summary of the Law in verses 27-28: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." This is total, complete love for God and, issuing from that, love for our neighbor. This is a summary of the Law that Jesus himself has given in other places. Either this young lawyer has heard Jesus teach this before, or perhaps this understanding that the essence of the law is love for God and love for man is present even among the Jews in that culture. Whatever his source, he comes back with this rather straightforward and correct response. And Jesus commends him: "You answered absolutely correctly. You understand the essence of all the Law. Love God, and love your neighbor. Do this, and you will live."

### **Who is my neighbor?**

But this young lawyer, being very much like we are, immediately begins to think, "How can I feel good about myself in

relationship to this wonderful, all-encompassing expression of the Law?" So he asks Jesus this question: "And who is my neighbor?" Now, this young man would already have an answer in his own heart about this. It was very well documented in the literature of Judaism and the codification of their tradition in that time who one's neighbor was. A neighbor, to the Jew, was another Jew or a convert to Judaism. No one outside of the faith of Judaism was to be considered a neighbor. In fact, by this time, those outside of Judaism were viewed by the religious leaders as total enemies of God who therefore didn't deserve their compassion. If the Jews showed compassion toward a Samaritan or a Gentile, they were working against God. That is the mind-set that the young lawyer brings to the question. He wants to find out if Jesus will corroborate that or in some way now anger the religious hierarchy by stepping outside the bounds of what is accepted.

But Jesus is once again too insightful for him, and so he poses another counter-question. He sets up this counter-question with a long introduction, the story of the Good Samaritan. Let's look through the elements of that story and try to gain some insight that will then allow us to understand Jesus' application of the story in his counter-question and what it means to us. It's been wonderful to study this story again and read all kinds of literature on it. I want to especially acknowledge Kenneth Bailey, who has done marvelous research into the background of life in Palestine in Jesus' time and has given us much insight into these stories that Jesus has told.<sup>3</sup> I'm in his debt for a lot of the interesting background that informs the story.

As the story goes, a man is going down from Jerusalem toward Jericho. That lonely, 15 mile stretch of road from Jerusalem to Jericho was infamous for the presence of robbers who would hide in strategically chosen caves and attack travelers. The man walking down the road to Jericho is attacked by robbers, stripped naked, beaten, and left by the side of the road, half dead, as it says, which is a euphemism in that time for being unconscious and in danger of dying.

His being stripped naked and being unconscious are important details in the story. The normal way people in that culture identified different ethnic groups was twofold: by dress and by accent or language. Both of those indices have been taken away from the parade of people who will subsequently come down the road. They don't know who this man is. We've already said that the definition of a neighbor was a Jew or a convert to Judaism. But he is stripped of anything that would indicate who he was or where he came from. He has been reduced to that most simple thing: a human being in need.

### **Going along with cultural expectations**

Now Jesus introduces the first of the people who discover this man as they are coming down the Jericho road. He is a priest. A priest would almost certainly be riding a donkey. That detail is not in the story, but those hearing the story would have assumed it because priests were of the upper class of that day. That also sets a counterpoint to the Samaritan, who comes later, who is also riding.

Jesus says the priest rides down the road, looks, and passes by. He is presented with an enormous moral dilemma. His office requires him to remain ritually pure. The story says he is going down to Jericho from Jerusalem, probably after doing his temple service. Often the priests lived in Jericho. There was a rotation of priests in the temple service. They would come to Jerusalem and minister in the temple, usually for two weeks, and then they would be off the rotation for awhile. He has probably just finished his stint in the temple service and is heading back home. He has just been in a position of high importance, of acclaim and esteem. If he comes in contact with a Samaritan or a Gentile, or even more importantly with a dead person, he will become ritually defiled. The religious rules of the day interpreted such contact as coming within a distance of four cubits. It would take an extensive purification ritual for him to be restored so that he could perform priestly duties again. Part of that ritual would require him to be in a place of humiliation outside the gate of Jerusalem, where those coming into the temple to worship would see him. He would be identified as an unclean person who was going through this ritual purification process. He is being forced to choose between the general expectations and support of his religious community, and the risk of that defilement, with all the humiliation and associated costs, if he even gets too close to this person lying by the side of the road.

The definition of a neighbor provides the priest a loophole that allows him to choose not to get close enough to defile himself. Perhaps he would even be applauded for that choice by his fellow priests and Pharisees. So he rides on by and leaves the person there.

I would suggest that you and I often fall into this same trap. In my adult life and ministry I've had the privilege of observing rather closely Christianity on three different continents—all over the United States, Central and South America, and all over Europe, both eastern and western. I can tell you that everywhere that Christianity exists, there develops within the locale an expression of Christianity that becomes *the* accepted Christian culture, and all sorts of do's and don'ts are adopted around that. Sometimes they're outwardly spoken, sometimes they're subliminal and just accepted, but we all know them. We know there are just certain things that good Christians do and certain things that good Christians don't do. We get used to living out our faith within the confines of these rules and mores that develop around Christian structures. But the uncomfortable thing that sometimes happens to us is that life runs right up against those rules and forces us to make decisions: Are we going to step outside those rules and risk what will come back at us from the Christians around us? Will we have the courage to do that if we think the call of God requires us to?

Let me illustrate. Back in the early eighties, a good friend of mine named Dennis was pastoring a church in St. Cloud, Minnesota, a town about sixty or seventy miles north of Minneapolis. At that time Ginger and I were raising support to go overseas. We drove up to St. Cloud one Saturday, and the next day I spoke a number of times at his church. At the end of the final evening service, Dennis looked at me and said, "You know, Ginger can go on home with Lynette. You and I can just relax for a little bit, and then we'll go home and have dinner."

We got into his car, and lo and behold, he took me to a bar in downtown St. Cloud. As soon as we walked in the door of this dark, dinghy establishment, five guys called out, "Hi, Dennis!" They all knew him. This was in the era when Pac Man was just really hitting its peak, and there was this Pac Man machine there. Dennis and I bought Cokes at the bar, and as we sat around talking, I watched what was going on. I found out that my buddy Dennis was the #1 Pac Man player in all of St. Cloud. He sat down at the Pac Man machine, and they were all cheering him on and talking to him. We spent about an hour talking with these guys in the bar, and then we got in the car and headed home. He said, "You know, this is where the gospel is needed most, but if my church knew I was here, they'd fire me." Good Christians didn't go in bars. But he kept going and taking the risk and hoping that he could eventually start leading people to understand what he was doing and open their minds to it.

Would you and I take up that same kind of challenge? We're much more comfortable operating within the bounds of set rules. That's what the priest in Jesus' story was doing. He was prohibited from extending himself to this human being in need; he could not risk the disfavor of the community or any other repercussions that might come in order to radically love this person in need.

Let's move on in the story.

### **Following a bad example**

Next a Levite comes along. He is probably walking; he has less money and prestige. He comes to the place where the hurt man is lying. He probably risks getting a little bit closer to see if this man is alive or dead. The consequences for defilement are not as stringent for him. But we're told he too goes on by. Now why is that? There are two possibilities. Perhaps he is afraid of robbers, rightfully so. If he stops to attend to this person, particularly if he has no animal to carry him, he can at the very most offer first aid and hope that he doesn't get beaten up himself by any of the robbers who are lurking nearby.

But I don't think that's his main motivation for going on by. Many who have looked at this particular scene have assumed that the Levite almost certainly knows the priest is on the road ahead of him. It was customary before starting out on a barren road like this to ask who else was on the road. In fact, your life might depend on that information. I've come to agree with those who hold this view. And so perhaps it is the example of the priest that gives the Levite the freedom to do nothing. He could be thinking, "If the priest thought it was okay to go by, who am I to contradict him? In fact, if I render aid to this person, I'll be showing up the priest and bringing disfavor on him, and perhaps eventually on myself." So he too begins to calculate a way out.

This is another trap we often fall into. We use the behavior of leaders or others whom we see as examples and say, "Well, if they don't do this, then I don't need to." What's behind this thinking is an attempt to manipulate our circumstances so that we can live what we think are religiously good lives and feel good about ourselves without being forced out of our comfort zones to radically trust God and to radically obey him. It's far easier just to conform.

That's what the Levite does. He falls into the same trap as the priest, allowing the dictates of the customs of his culture to determine his choices.

Well, if you were in Jesus' audience listening to this story, you would be anticipating the next character. Obviously Jesus is walking right down the hierarchy. He started with the priest, and now he's to the Levite, and next will be the Jewish layman. But surprise! Jesus introduces a radical twist to the story. The next character is not a Jewish layman coming down the road but a dreaded, hated Samaritan!

There are no cultural analogies in our society that can compare to the hatred that the Jew had for the Samaritan. They were the lowest of the low, the dogs, the cursed half-breeds. They were thought to be the worst possible concoction of humanity. The disdain and condescension that the average Jew had for a Samaritan was monumental. Jesus is taking a great risk by making a dreaded Samaritan the hero in this story. He could have chosen anybody but a Samaritan, and it would have been well accepted.

### **Radical, costly love for the needy**

The Samaritan comes along and sees this man. He approaches the man. And then he does a series of things that bespeak enormous cost and consequence and risk as he offers aid to this needy human being. He demonstrates a radical love that goes beyond what anyone in that society could imagine because of the nature of the Jew-Samaritan relationship. First of all, he kneels and takes wine and oil and binds the wounds. (I'll come back in a moment to the symbolic nature of oil and wine in the story, which might actually give us a little nuance of a parallel idea Jesus is introducing.) The oil is costly. He binds the wounds. He then places the man on his own donkey that he was personally riding on. That phrase implies that he had more animals with him, perhaps carrying his goods. Having placed the wounded man on his own animal, he may very well have not gotten on himself, choosing instead to lead it. We can probably deduce that the Samaritan is a man of some means because he has animals and goods and some resources at his disposal. But he lowers himself to dress this needy person's wounds, pick him up, put him on his own animal, and take him to an inn.

This is very risky for him on another count, if the wounded man turned out to be Jewish. For one thing, the Samaritans were so hated that gifts received from them had to be sanctified. So the very oil and wine that he uses are, in the eyes of a Jew, corrupt. Further, in the irrational nature of revenge in that society, often the one who gives care to the wounded is the one upon whom revenge will come from the family. After all, he must have a guilty conscience; why else would he stop? He is already a hated Samaritan. "How could you, a dirty Samaritan, touch our loved one?" So the irrational need for revenge would probably boil over if he were discovered. He could go into town and drop the man at the door of the inn, having done everything else, and leave incognito to hopefully preserve his life. But he doesn't do that. He stays the night. Now he's fully identified as the caregiver.

Not only that, but the wounded man, having lost everything in this robbery, will never be able to leave the inn until he can pay the bill. The inns of that day were pretty rough places, and the innkeeper will probably throw him in debtor's prison or at least hold him there until somebody comes and pays that debt. Anticipating that, the Samaritan uses his own resources, which he has no possibility of recovering, because no Jewish family would ever repay a Samaritan for a kind deed. He pays the impending debt of the injured man and even promises to return to make sure he's all right and to pay any additional debts, should they be incurred. Thus he makes it possible for the injured man to leave once he has recovered, without any burden of debt hanging over him.

So help for the needy comes from an unexpected source at great expense and great risk.

Interwoven into this wonderful story may be a subtle reference to Jesus himself. Here are the religious leaders of the day. They have all their rituals, all their ducks in a row; they know exactly how to live and what they're supposed to do. But there is great need, and the satisfaction of the deep need will come from an unexpected source outside of the religious authority. Someone will, at great cost and great risk to himself, supply everything that is needed for the rescue of those who are hurting. It's a wonderful picture within the story of Jesus himself, attested to further by the elements of the oil and wine, which were symbols in the sacrificial worship system of the day.

As Jesus comes to the end of this terribly shocking story, he takes the question the lawyer asked him and now offers his counter-question. Remember, the lawyer's question was "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' question is "Which person proved himself to be a neighbor?" He turns the question on end, and the lawyer has to conclude, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus says, "Go and do the same."

### **Impossible for man, possible for God**

In Luke 18 Jesus will have an encounter with another young man whom we call today "the rich young ruler." At the end of another discussion about the Law and eternal life, Jesus tells him that the only thing he needs to do is sell everything he has and give it to the poor. When this makes the rich young ruler very sad, Jesus comments that it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, to which the audience responds, "Then who can be saved?"

I would suggest that at this point in our story, the lawyer and everyone around Jesus are asking the very same question. If what it means to love God is to love my neighbor at any cost-everything I have and am-to love anyone in need, regardless of race, ethnic background, or religious affiliation-then who can be saved? This whole story begs that question. And the answer is the same one Jesus gives in Luke 18:27: "The things impossible with men are possible with God."

This story highlights for us that the essence of religion is not keeping rules and formulas. The essence of it is to love God and love others, and when we are faced with that, we understand the enormity of our inadequacy and are cast upon the mercy and grace of God. There is nowhere else to go. When our hearts cry out, "Who then can do this?" the answer is, "Only with God is it possible." And the marvelous, transforming grace of God is available to us.

The radical love for our neighbors that Jesus calls us to reminds us of our deep need of God's grace. But not being able to do it perfectly or fully and having to depend on the grace of God does not negate that this is truly the essence of life with God. We are called to be men and women who love radically all those around us.

It's so much easier to just play church. We all know what to do. That's the problem with legalism. It allows us to manipulate our religious reality into a form with which we can become comfortable and feel good about ourselves, but we miss the real point, which is to know God, and to have our lives transformed by that so that we can be set free to truly love people. The radical call for us is to get out of the pews and out of our comfort zones, to realize that there are naked and beaten people out there who have had everything stripped away from them, who are crying out for the love of God expressed through another

human being. We dare not allow ourselves to be trapped by our own religiosity. Instead we must be set free by the grace of God himself to radically love.

This radical love of others calls us to a sacrificial giving of ourselves no matter what the cost, whether it's reputation or convenience or money or time. Every time I come across a need, I find myself calculating what it's going to cost me. If I take step 1 toward meeting someone's need, will my life then be intertwined with them in such a way that it will require steps 2, 3, 4, and 5? Might it inconvenience me if I allow this person of need into my life? Now, we need wisdom and discernment as to the right way to help, but I think for most of us that is not our problem. Our problem is a hesitancy to allow ourselves to truly love another because we don't know if we can afford that cost in time and convenience and money and whatever. But it is the call of God that we live that way.

I've been quite enamored with the story of a church called Mosaic in Los Angeles. (It used to be called the Church on Brady.) It's a church that has involved itself in all kinds of unique ministries, and I've been interested in tracking some of them. I recently read some material giving their philosophy of ministry on their web site, [www.mosaic.org](http://www.mosaic.org). The pastor of that church, Erwin McManus, has written an article that explains their core values.<sup>4</sup> He tells an anecdote that illustrates how he himself came to confront this issue of love in his life. Let me just share it with you.

*Many of us love religion all too much and God all too little. We love ourselves too much and the world too little. Kim, my wife, is an exception; she is one of those rare people who loves profoundly. Sometimes it's an incredible irritant because I'm always challenged by how hard I have to work at loving. For example, once we were in one of our church plants, and it was pouring down rain. I didn't want to get my good suit wet, so I did spiritual things in the building to avoid helping people to their cars. It was an act of absolute selfishness, but I thought I had gotten away with it until Kim walked up and said, "These people need a ride home." Inwardly, I responded in a decidedly unbiblical way, but I agreed to take them home. We rushed out to the car and I got completely soaked. We dropped them off, and as I drove home silently in this monsoon, Kim pointed out a man walking by the side of the road. At her insistence, I stopped and ran out in the rain. The man was a transient with a cart that had fallen over, and he was disoriented and confused. I had to reassemble his cart in the driving rain. Then I started to pick up his belongings, and I realized it was literally garbage. I am a clean freak and this physically sickened me. Nevertheless, we picked up all his garbage, and only then did it providentially stop raining! I thought to myself, "This man is going to receive Jesus because this will make a really good story." So I shared Jesus with him and he said, "I'm just not interested." Pulling out a wet business card, he continued, "If your church has garbage they'd like to give away, I'd love to have it." I was fuming. I helped this man by getting drenched and exhibiting incredible love for him and he wanted my garbage and rejected my God. I got in our car without a word and Kim started crying. I thought she was upset that my attitude in helping this man was less than Christlike, but instead she said, "That was the greatest sermon you ever preached." I've never forgotten those words. Before we start getting all inspired about better strategies and effective methodologies and church growth and models, we need to ask ourselves if we really love people. Are our hearts broken for a lost and hurting world? Are we motivated by love?*

## NOTES

1. Michelle Quinn, Four Families, Money Concerns Wealthy, Poor, and Those in the Middle, *San Jose Mercury News*, August 16, 1999.
2. Michelle Quinn, Green with Envy, *San Jose Mercury News*, August 16, 1999.
3. Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, © 1976, and *Through Peasant Eyes*, © 1980, both William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI.

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